

Guest Opinion

I've lost trust in City Hall and the Statesman Journal. After living in the Salem area for thirty-seven years, this disturbs me. I used to believe that City of Salem officials were committed to serving the broad public interest, not special interests, and our community newspaper had the same goal.

Not any more.

In May I released a report on the notorious 2013 U.S. Bank tree removals, where five marvelous Japanese Zelkovas in the Historic District were cut down. The report is based on public records documents I requested, including emails that previously had been hidden from view.

The title and subtitle tell the tale of what I found: "Outrage: Salem's U.S. Bank Tree Killings. The true story of how City officials and the bank president cut down five large, healthy, beautiful downtown trees for no good reason, and misled citizens about why they did it."

(The 18-page report can be found at www.usbankkillstreets.com, or via a Google search.)

I discuss ten reasons why anyone who cares about trees, the environment, and ethical government should be outraged about how the Zelkovas came to be turned into stumps.

The biggest outrage is that back room dealmaking between Public Works Director Peter Fernandez and U.S. Bank President Ryan Allbritton led to the tree killings, even though facts, expert arborist advice, public testimony, and the law all demanded the trees be saved.

In other words, City officials bowed to a special interest rather than fulfilling their duty to serve the general public. Is this still happening? Sure seems so.

Howard Hall is one example. Once again, a citizen committee (this time, the Historic Landmarks Commission) voted to preserve a cherished part of Salem. Once again, City officials sided with a large corporation (this time, Salem Hospital) in overturning that vote.

So my report is about a lot more than the U.S. Bank trees debacle. It provides a window into how the Mayor, City Manager, and others at City Hall generally are handling important policy decisions. In short, in an untrustworthy fashion.

Here's why I also no longer trust the Statesman Journal. An investigative reporter was intensely interested in my "Outrage" report. A story was written. In early May I was told the story would run on an upcoming Sunday. May became June.

Now it is August. No story. Just a question: "Why no story?"

Well, the reporter's editors have squashed it. Just as no one at the City of Salem or U.S. Bank could come up with a good reason why the Zelkovas needed to be cut down, I haven't gotten a good reason why readers of the Statesman Journal have been kept in the dark about the outrageous actions of City officials.

I want to feel like I can trust City Hall and the Statesman Journal to do the right thing for Salem. I hope this feeling returns. For now, though, my trust is as dead as the U.S. Bank trees.

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